

## **Adolescence: A Time of Change**

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Adolescence is the seven years between the end of childhood and the beginning of adult life. The difficult stage of adolescence begins quietly and, with increasing force, hurls the child transformed into adulthood. For the parents it is a time of transformation, also. They must begin the difficult transition from being one who cares for a child to one who cares about a child. Ideally, the young person's relationship with their parents would be at its most harmonious and supportive at this time; typically it is filled with tension, anxiety, and conflict.

In the adolescent's drive to take control of their lives, they often behave in ways that are seen as harebrained by their parents, as they demand freedom in the areas their parents previously regulated. However, even as the adolescent separates from parents, there is still present a longing for parental love and supervision. The young person is striving to be seen as different from them, yet still cherishes their approval. It is painful for teenagers to cut these parental bonds, but if these knots are restricting independence, what else can they do if they are to be seen as an individual? This is often a very confusing and destructive time for both the parents and the children.

Parents must reduce their control, and yet their place as role models and authority figures cannot be underestimated. The parents' task is to develop relationships with their children that are accepting, caring, and stable. This does not imply abandoning parental rights and responsibilities, but rather balancing teenage freedom with accountability.

The adolescent passage has historically subjected its elders to behaviors, attitudes, and values which serve to help the teenager establish individual identity, and which frequently shock, disgust, or anger the older generation. Kahlil Gibran said "Parents are the whetstone upon which teenagers grind out their will." Certainly teenagers educate their parents to change and keep up-to-date. They like to see their parents grow and learn, while respecting the consistent enforcement of rules and values. A relationship which bestows dignity upon both parent and child is a worthwhile goal, yet often difficult to achieve during the teen years. It helps parents and youth if both keep in mind that these actions are all

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## **Adolescence: A Time of Change**

### **Page 2**

important steps in helping the youth achieve a separate and individual identity. It is important that parents learn and understand the typical phases of adolescence. If parents understand these phases they are more likely to keep a positive mental attitude as they understand the purpose behind the struggle. In addition, if their child's development does seem atypical and destructive, they can get professional counseling earlier.

Today, it is very difficult to help teenagers in establishing guidelines for sexual contact. Most old, strict behavior codes are gone, and the new freedom raises more questions for the adolescent than it answers. It is almost impossible to force moral standards on young people's sexual behaviors, as rules and advice are seen as an imposition, and are often disregarded. What helps most is to keep open communication so that the adolescent can talk freely.

If the parents can listen openly and without judgment to their child's feelings, the child is more likely to understand the consequences of their decisions. When children feel they are accountable for their actions they are more likely to act constructively and responsibly. I suggest parents think of discipline not as a way to be in charge or control, but as a learning process that can lead to self-discipline, responsible independence, and increased self-esteem.

Self-esteem is critical to handling pressure in a constructive manner. High self-esteem is present when the teenage has friends, social groups, and a general sense of believing they can influence their life. This brings a sense of pride in their own unique personal attributes enabling them to stand up to peer pressure more effectively. Parents can increase their child's self-esteem by:

- Viewing them as worthwhile human beings who are accepted for their inherent qualities
- Keeping criticism to a minimum
- Being honest with them about your feelings
- Encouraging your child to share feelings honestly
- Recognizing effort and improvement
- Encouraging child participation in decision making

Being a parent requires consistency and flexibility. In times of struggle, affection, humor, and eye contact can often help increase communication. Parents often feel trapped by always responding to the child's negative behavior patterns in predictable ways. Take a break! Allow new ways of relating to unfold.

## **Adolescence: A Time of Change**

### **Page 3**

As parents accept their children so will their children accept them. This gives parents and children more freedom to be spontaneous and honest in expression of feelings, values, and expectations.

It is helpful if parents study and network with other parents. This can provide not only encouragement and needed support, but also new ideas and information on parenting. Without conscious study, parents tend to recreate the parenting styles of their own family of origin. Support groups help parents refresh and gain a new perspective.

It's easy to get caught in communication patterns which feel tense to parent and child. Studying the different available parenting systems may help develop more harmonious communication. There are many parenting theories to help parents integrate styles for disciplining children; it's best to focus on building relationships while learning to work with the abilities and strengths unique to the child's age level. It is important to acknowledge that the parent and youngster both share the responsibility of maintaining a relationship. Parents shouldn't place the blame on themselves or their children exclusively if things are not going well.

Although adolescents encounter conflicting pressures, in the end they must begin to take responsibility by making decisions that are true to their feelings and ideals. Adolescence is a time in which the children must be allowed to seek so that they can begin to find their place in the adult world. If, after exploration and study, there are still painful, serious problems which are unresolvable within your family, professional counseling can help by giving new perspectives and insight.